

Parashat Vayishlach, 5779, 2018:

We Are Jacob and Israel

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Sefer Bereishit presents three celebrated name changes that were declared by the Almighty or one of His angels. The first two were Abram and Sarai, whose names were changed to Abraham and Sarah:

And Abram fell upon his face, and G-d spoke with him, saying...your name shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. And G-d said to Abraham, “Your wife Sarai – you shall not call her name Sarai, for Sarah is her name.” (17:3, 5, and 15, these and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Midrash Bereishit Rabbah makes it very clear that Abraham’s name change is absolute and universal in nature, to the extent that it is forbidden to call him by his prior appellation:

Bar Kapparah said: “Anyone who calls Abraham, ‘Abram’ [from this time forward] will violate a positive commandment (*aseh*).” Rabbi Lavi said: “He will not only disobey a positive directive, he will transgress a negative prohibition (*lo ta’aseh*), as well: ‘Your name shall no longer be called Abram,’ is the negative prohibition, and ‘Your name shall be Abraham,’ is the positive commandment.” (*Seder Vayishlach* 78:3, this and the following translation and brackets my own)

According to our Midrash, however, Sarah’s name change is directed solely to Abraham, since the verse reads: “Your wife Sarai – you shall not call her name Sarai, for Sarah is her name.” In other words, Hashem gave Abraham a clear-cut personal directive to help him understand that his beloved wife was no longer his princess alone (“Sarai”), rather, she was now ready to take her place on the stage of world history as “Sarah.” As the verse states:

“I will bless her, and she will become [a mother of] nations; kings of nations will be from her.” (17:16)

Our *parasha* contains the third divinely-decreed name change in *Sefer Bereishit*, as found in two *pasukim* (verses) that narrate Jacob’s transition from Jacob to Israel:

And he [Esau’s angel] said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, because you have commanding power with [an angel of] G-d and with men, and you have prevailed.

G-d said to him, “Your name is Jacob. Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.” And He named him Israel. (32:29 and 35:10)

On the surface, these *pasukim* seem to be quite similar. A considered reading reveals, however, that there are two different speakers; in 32:29, Esau’s angel declares Jacob’s name change, whereas in 35:10, the speaker is the Almighty. In addition, 32:29 appears to depict a permanent name change, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,” whereas in 35:10, Hashem somewhat curiously reminds Jacob, “Your name is Jacob,” prior to stating, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.” The confluence of these two verses led our Midrash to ask whether Jacob’s name change to Israel was similar to his grandfather’s transformation from Abram to Abraham, or was it substantively different?

Is it the case that one who calls Jacob “Jacob” will be in violation of a positive commandment [as in the case of Abram/Abraham]? It has been taught: The name, “Jacob,” has not been uprooted, rather, the name Israel is now the essential appellation, whereas, the name, “Jacob,” is now of secondary import. [The opposite approach was offered by] Rabbi Zechariah in the name of Rabbi Acha — [Hashem told Jacob] that his primary name remained “Jacob,” but henceforth, “Israel will be your name.” In other words, “Jacob” was his main name, and “Israel” was his additional secondary name.

Based on a close reading of the two opinions in the Midrash, Jacob, unlike Abraham, retains his original name. The only question under debate is whether or not “Jacob” remains his

essential name, or is it somehow eclipsed by the new name, “Israel?” In my opinion, the Midrash is teaching us a profound lesson regarding Jacob’s very nature, that henceforth he has a dual persona that is reflected by each of these names. As such, there are periods when he thrives as Jacob and lives as “an innocent man, dwelling in tents,” (25:27) and there are times when he must rise to existential challenges and be Israel, the one who has “commanding power with [an angel of] G-d and with men.” (32:29)

The Jacob persona is illustrated by the prophet Michah when he speaks of Jacob in this manner: “You (Hashem) shall give the truth of Jacob (*emet l’Ya’akov*), the loving-kindness of Abraham, which You swore to our forefathers from days of yore.” (*Sefer Michah* 7:20) In my estimation, *Emet l’Ya’akov* is only possible when Jacob is living a tranquil and introspective existence. Little wonder, then, that the first *pasuk* of next week’s *parasha* states: “Jacob dwelt (*vayeshuv*) in the land of his father's sojourning, in the land of Canaan.” (37:1) In line with my analysis, *Midrash Rabbah, Bereishit* 84:3 interprets “*vayeshuv*” as Jacob’s manifest desire to dwell serenely (*b’shalveh*) in the Land of Canaan, the land of his grandfather and father.

In contrast, there are periods in history when Jacob must project his Israel persona, and act as one “with commanding power with men.” At these moments in history, Jacob as Israel must become a Maccabi, as our people did during the battles with Amalek, the Syrian-Greeks (Chanukah), the War of Independence, and in each succeeding war that our beloved *Medinat Yisrael* has been forced to fight when threatened by the forces of darkness and hatred. As we have demonstrated time and time again, however, both as a people and a nation, our goal is *shalom*. This idea was given powerful voice by Prime Minister Golda

Meir (1898-1978), when she declared in her oral autobiography: “When peace comes we will perhaps in time be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons.” (*A Land of Our Own: An Oral Autobiography*, 1973, edited by Marie Syrkin, p. 242).

May we be *zocheh* (merit) to see the fulfillment of *emet l’Ya’akov*, and the final words of the *Kaddish* realized in our time: “May He Who makes peace in His celestial heights make peace in His ultimate compassion for us and for all the Jewish people.” May this take place soon and in our days, *v’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.